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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of partisan political activities on an educational referendum and junior college board of education election. The study focused on the activities of the California Democratic Council, a Democratic organization formed to make political endorsements that could not be made by the party. The election examined was held in six California cities to determine whether a junior college district should be formed and to elect the junior college district's board of education. Data were collected through participant observation of council activities and from minutes, informal conversations with delegates, and newspaper reports. The researcher concluded that party involvement in local educational politics may be based largely on issues extraneous to education. Although there was no evidence that partisan involvement caused a return to patronage or corruption, it did appear that partisanship could gloss over important educational problems and that it may not be superior to nonpartisanship in issue differentiation and aggregation. (Author/JM)

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A Partisan Political Organization's Intervention in the Election of a Nonpartisan Board of Education

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ABSTRACT

During an educational referendum and board election, the partisan political activities of a unit of the California Democratic Council indicated that political party involvement in local educational politics may be based in large measure on issues extraneous to education. Although the case presented here provides no ammunition to those who see partisan involvement in nonpartisan elections as causing a return to patronage and corruption, it does indicate that partisanship not only may gloss over important educational problems, but may differ little from nonpartisanship in terms of issue differentiation and aggregation.

In this study, investigation is made of the partisan political activities of a congressional district unit of the California Democratic Council during an educational referendum and board election in a urban area.

The concept of nonpartisanship in school board elections constitutes an article of faith for most Americans. Although political partisanship in local education exists both openly and clandestinely, it is relatively uncommon; for several years most of the public school systems in the United States have been nominally apolitical (Ziegler and Jennings, 1974: 2-4). The roots of the opposition to partisanship may be found in the blatant corruption of local politics in the past. Victorious political parties often used schools as prizes. Party needs determined decisions on personnel, finance, and building. Reformers attempted to replace partisan dominance with a nonpartisan system of control in which political parties were excluded completely from school governance and policy-making was in the hands of civic-minded people whose desires would be translated into administrative action by neutral experts (Tyack, 1974:126-147; Zeigler & Jennings, 1974: Chapter 1). The reformers were largely successful, and in most areas of the United States now, any form of partisanship in school affairs is strongly opposed. Arguments against partisanship still rest partly on images of curruption, but other reasons for opposition also exist, including the fear that citizens' educational views will be distorted by the partisan parties' interest in subordinating educational issues to general political issues.

Despite wide support for nonpartisanship among both the public and professional educators, during the past few years political scientists and

educational researchers have given intensive scrutiny to the validity of the concept of nonpartisanship. Many scholars assert that corruption in local partisan politics is no longer significant (Martin, 1969:270) and that partisanship, especially in metropolitan areas, may reflect more accurately than nonpartisanship the issue preferences and priorities of citizens (Jennings, 1975:242-243. Proponents of partisanship argue that it would simply make explicit the political nature of the school system, thereby increasing the responsiveness of the school board to the public (Zeigler and Jennings, 1974:51). Partisanship would presumably eliminate such ostensible results of nonpartisanship as "politics of faction, of pressure groups, of particular organizations, and of temporary small coalitions of individuals" (Thompson, 1976:74-75). Partisanship would in effect create an open politics, forcing candidates to make clear their policy preferences.

No definite empirical evidence can be marshaled to confirm the validity of either camp's stand in the partisanship-nonpartisanship debate. In fact, the debate may decline in relevance if, as some investigation suggests, partisan affiliation of any candidate means less to voters now than in the past (Burnham, 1975). Yet the debate cannot be structured adequately, let alone resolved, without consideration of the changing nature of party organizations. None of the proponents of either partisanship or nonpartisanship have placed their arguments in the context of current political organization in the United States.

The traditional local party machine, depending on patronage and a body of regular workers to keep it in power, still exists, but in many areas it has been replaced by an organization of workers for whom politics constitutes

important but nevertheless part-time avocation. J. Q. Wilson (1962; 1973: 95-118) has described these workers as chiefly middle class, with enough time and money to give active attention to politics. On the basis of his studies of their activities in three major cities, he concluded that they exhibited a solidarity of ideological purpose and a relative disinterest in material incentives, such as financial rewards or political office. Campaigns involving these volunteers appeared to be highly issue-oriented, and the candidates they support appeared to have been chosen on the basis of ideological consistency (Wilson, 1973:95). The volunteers may coalesce around a single candidate or a slate of candidates, or they may join together in clubs which are associated with one of the major political parties. Those belonging to the clubs appear to have exerted a more consistent and long-term influence on party policies than have those centered on particular candidates.

In this study, attempt has been made to discover why and how members of the clubs in a particular metropolitan area in California became involved in the election of a junior college board of education in cities with a long tradition of nonpartisanship in all local elective offices. No in-depth investigation has previously been made of the activities of a volunteer political body in local school politics, despite the growth of such bodies during the past two decades. Enough information had been produced on the Democratic clubs, however (Wilson, 1962; Wilson, 1973:95-118; Carney, 1958), to justify use of the following working hypothesis: <u>Political ideology plays a major part in the policy stance of the volunteer organization in the campaign</u>.[1] Basic questions guiding the study were as follows: (1) Why did the organization enter a particular school board campaign? Was ideology the

major determinant or were other factors responsible? (2) What educational issues were involved? Did they relate to basic political beliefs? (3) How were candidates chosen? On the basis of ideological consistency or other factors? (4) How was the campaign carried on within a traditional nonpartisan context? How much attention was given to party labels? To basic policy?

THE ORGANIZATION INVESTIGATED

The study focused on a congressional district organization consisting of twenty-seven Democratic clubs of the California Democratic Council. The California Democratic Council (CDC) is a statewide volunteer organization that arose during the 1950's to undertake various political activities, including endorsement of candidates in primaries (an act prohibited to the official party organization) and in general elections. By the period of this study, the CDC had approximately 70,000 members. Although its success in achieving its policy goals and securing election of its endorsed candidates has been variable, its power appears to be substantial, and its endorsements usually have been sought eagerly by Democratic candidates. It is organized in a federal structure with "councils" of clubs in assembly districts, congressional districts or counties, depending on the number of members available. Each council may endorse candidates within its area.

One of the most active councils in the state during the 1960's and early 1970's was the congressional district council receiving attention in this study. It included clubs from four small cities, one medium-sized city, and one moderately large city in northern California. The council's area covered some relatively poor neighborhoods, including a large ghetto.

Nevertheless, the 27 clubs comprising the council were, with one exception, predominantly middle class. The main interest of members lay with major political issues; American involvement in Viet Nam had been the prime topic of discussion at council meetings for several years.

At the time of this investigation, some 1,700 people belonged to the 27 clubs in the council. For every 20 members or fraction thereof, each club sent one elected delegate to the district council. The council had 84 delegates. These delegates voted on various measures and elected an executive committee, a president, and a director, the latter representing the council on the statewide board. Seldom did more than 50 delegates attend meetings of the council, and if no dramatic issue was to be considered, delegates usually numbered no more than 25.

The particular designation of the district council investigated, the names of the cities in which the clubs operated, and the names of individuals have been changed to preserve anonymity.

METHODOLOGY

This author acted as participant-observer. For several years he had been an officer of a club and a delegate to the council. He participated in all council meetings and relevant subcommittee meetings during the period of the study. Normally, he took notes immediately after adjournment; he took them during conversations only when information was such that it was clearly usable for official purposes. Other sources of information included official minutes, informal conversations with delegates, and newspaper reports. During the course of the investigation, no other participant knew the observer was conducting a study. When the investigation was complete,

however, several of the major participants were shown draft copies. Anonymity was guaranteed. Participant-observation allows depth of investigation which is impossible in most general studies, and it can take into account nuances which could not be detected by other methods (Douglas, 1976: see especially Chapter 6). For topics that have received little previous empirical examination, the method is extremely useful in laying the groundwork for more extensive studies.

THE CASE

An election was to be held in six cities to determine whether a junior college district encompassing all the cities should be formed. Also to be determined, contingent on approval of the district by voters, was the membership of the district's seven seat board of education. Although the members had to reside in the subdistricts they represented, they were to be elected at large by voters in all six cities. Metroland, the largest city in the area, already had a junior college, but it was overcrowded. Projected increases in enrollment necessitated a larger college to accommodate the student population in all the cities concerned. According to a report of the Field Service Center of the University of California at Berkeley, a new junior college district was the only feasible solution. Expansion of the Metroland college, with other cities providing funds in proportion to their students' attendance at the college, would have been more expensive to all districts. The report stated that the six-city district would draw uniformly on the wealth of northern Balboa County, thus equalizing financial burdens; "the district is of sufficient size and potential enrollment to make possible sound educational planning and a multiplicity of programs...."

The Decision to Intervene

The 45th Congressional District Council (45th CDC) had devoted considerable effort to nonpartisan campaigns. During the first months of the year of the campaign described here, the clubs had spearheaded support of a "fair housing" ordinance and had actively worked for a mayorality candidate, three candidates for a city council, and a candidate for the position of city auditor. The organization had generally eschewed school board elections, although the previous year it had endorsed one candidate in the Metroland Board election. With other district councils, it had actively supported candidates for the nonpartisan position of state superintendent of public instruction.

The council gave little attention to the junior college issue scheduled for the ballot in November; the fair housing campaign elicited far more attention. In May, however, the chairman of the issues committee, Robert Riordan, an extremely active party worker and a full-time law student, suggested at a monthly meeting that the 45th CDC consider "the upcoming junior college election."

He explained that he personally did not think the council should support the junior college, but that the Republican Metroland Tribune, the bete noire of Democrats in the district, would support candidates with all its strength, resulting in another "Republican dominated board, if the council did not intervene." He recommended that the delegates give the matter some thought. He said it would be discussed at the issues committee meeting in early June. He invited all delegates--32 delegates were attending this full meeting--to attend at his home.

Most of the council members had never heard of the junior college

election, and as Riordan spoke, they sat talking to each other on sundry topics.

At the next council meeting, in June, Riordan, his face red, announced that no one, "not even my wife," had shown up for the scheduled meeting. He remarked that the issue was "important to us all," but that he did not intend to sit around if no one cared.

At this point, the council's director, Norman Van Dyke, a lawyer viewed as politically moderate by most of the delegates, moved that the council's executive committee set up an endorsing convention for candidates for the junior college board. "Even if we don't want the college," he said, "it wouldn't harm us to endorse some candidates." (In discussions later, Van Dyke told a few of his associates that he had no objection to becoming a candidate.)

Riordan leaped to his feet and moved an amendment that Van Dyke's resolution be referred to the issues committee and that, after consideration by the committee, the whole council vote on whether to hold a convention. Van Dyke, certain that a convention would be held, moved an amendment requiring the executive committee to make a "provisional selection" of convention facilities. The amended motion was passed unanimously (and apathetically) by the delegates, and Riordan announced that everyone was invited to the issues committee meeting. "This time, I don't want to be alone," he said.

Nine people, including Riordan and his wife (also a delegate), attended the issues committee meeting on July 2 at Riordan's house. Seven of these people were among the most active members of the council, one was the wife of one of these, and the ninth person was the director of the

adjacent congressional district council, in whose territory were included two of the subdistricts which would be involved in the election--one small city and a part of Metroland.

The group first considered whether or not to support the junior college plan itself. Politically moderate members approved support, essentially on the ground that voter approval was inevitable. Van Dyke explained that under the state's Master Plan for Higher Education, a new junior college could not be avoided. No other members of the group had heard about the Master Plan, and his remarks were ignored. One of the most liberal members said, "What we're interested in is the racial problem--will blacks get a fair shake? We don't give a damn how much money is saved or lost."

"Yes," said a moderate. "This will be important for blacks with the population the way it is. Blacks can use the junior college more than whites."

The chairperson, Riordan, suggested that each item be considered in order. "First," he said, "the reasons against are clear: Pawns of the Tribune will probably dominate the board; second, because the election is at large, the Tribune will carry tremendous weight all over. And--let's be frank--we don't have enough money to fight the Tribune."

Five other members, both liberals and moderates, suggested that the council would lose power if it did not take part in the election, since virtually all civic leaders were advising the public to support the college. Van Dyke pointed out that no alternative plan was available and that the council would "certainly" want to run some liberal candidates. If the council opposed the formation of the district, he added, it would place its candidates in an untenable position. Actually, the group had not yet

decided to run candidates; Van Dyke himself, however, clearly intended to run.

A very liberal delegate said that if the council did not involve itself in the campaign, the result would be the "perpetuation of Republican leadership." He read to the group a newsletter from the chairman of the Republican State Central Committee, announcing the formation of a candidate development committee to recruit able young partisan candidates "by placing them in [nonpartisan] community leadership positions of all kinds." A member remarked that, during the past 35 years, only Republicans had served on the board of the area's Municipal Utility District, with each new member "hand-picked" by the district board. Van Dyke commented that he had found that, since 1931, only three of the 23 individuals who had served on the Metroland School Board had joined the board by election. The others had been appointed by incuments--all Republicans.[2]

Within a few minutes, the people at the meeting agreed that the 45th council and the adjacent congressional district council should support the district.

The next question concerned the problem of getting "strong" liberal candidates. One of the members of the group suggested that the 45th CDC and the adjacent CDC not make the selection themselves, but instead form a "coalition committee" which would include labor and ethnic minority representation. This method, he noted, would provide a "wider base" pool of potential candidates. Van Dyke stressed that candidates would not have to be members of clubs and that efforts could be made to reach various groups to encourage them to suggest candidates. After considerable discussion, the group decided to make plans at once for an endorsing con-

vention, instead of awaiting approval of the full council at its next meeting. As one member said, "It is easier to call off plans than to make hurried efforts all at once." The group agreed on the need for "high handed activity," as one member called it, and decided to present a motion at the next council meeting which would give power to call an endorsing convention to the executive committee, whose ten members included six of those present. Everyone assumed that such a measure would pass. The group further decided that selection of candidates would be made by people within subdistricts, each subdistrict representing a seat on the junior college board, and then ratified by the total convention, tentatively planned for early September. All club members--not just the council delegates who represented the clubs--would be members of the convention, as would representatives of other Democratic bodies.

Members made decisions concerning various subcommittees and agreed on the formation of a coordinating committee consisting of members of the councils' executive committees and two delegates each from minority organizations and organized labor.

As the meeting was adjourning, one person remarked, "Now we have to find out what a junior college does." Everybody laughed.

Two weeks later at the council meeting, delegates unanimously converted the suggestions developed at the committee meeting into council policy. Recommendations by leaders were almost always acceptable on issues that elicited no strong feelings, and the junior college issue had little salience for many of the delegates. The 45th CDC was on record as "enthusiastically supporting" the new junior college district. As he attempted to explain the complexities of financing the new district, Van Dyke

was interrupted within two minutes by a delegate who said, "The real issue is minority races. We don't care about the finances." Many delegates nodded in agreement. Interest swiftly turned to the next subject on the agenda, the United States military budget.

Preliminary Campaign Activities

The campaign coordinating committee included representatives from the adjacent district council, but the leaders of the 45th CDC retained the major initiative for the campaign. Despite the 45th CDC leaders' efforts, neither blacks nor labor unionists were involved much in the activities. Unionists attended only four of the committee's twelve meetings. The unions' political arm, COPE, was preparing on its own to endorse certain candidates. Blacks attended only three meetings. The lack of labor or black interest produced mixed feelings on the part of 45th CDC leaders. Although they wanted the support of union members and blacks, they always manifested some discomfort with them, even though they sympathized with their aspirations. J. Q. Wilson (1962:259-288) in his study of club activity in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, had noted the discomfort of liberal, affluent CDC members in dealing with blacks and union members. Class differences appear to cause serious tension even in ostensibly egalitarian organizations. In the case of the coordinating committee for this election, the tension caused an explosion during one meeting. Three white members were discussing the importance of vocational education for blacks when the black member attending, a club president from the Metroland ghetto, shouted that he was "sick of whites' deciding what's good for us. We don't want vocational education. We want college. Everyone tries to sidetrack us." No more was said of the issue while he was in the room.

The vocational aspect became a plank cast in the context of the needs of "industrial progress" and of retraining workers "displaced by automation." The plank did not differ from programs supported by other groups. Nor did the other planks; they had simply been borrowed from policies advocated by others: Open enrollment; a broad academic program; a general education and liberal arts program; an adult educational program; a counseling service; an efficient administration; and constant communication with business, labor and community groups. The only plank that differed from any of those of other groups was that calling for a location of campuses to serve the "greatest number of potential students." The 45th CDC leaders wanted a campus in the ghetto to facilitate attendance of blacks, but did not want to express the view directly, fearing some whites might be alienated.

The next task was to find candidates. The coordinating committee chairman appealed to all club members to supply the names of potential candidates who would accept the "general ideas of the issues" and who were "good Democrats." In the congressional district adjacent to the 45th CDC, no problem arose: Two men, one the vice-principal of a high school and the other a lawyer and junior college teacher, were eager to run. But for the 45th CDC, five candidates were needed. One person in each of three subdistricts was anxious to run: Van Dyke; Harry Trice, a tax association official who headed one of the council's largest clubs; and John Hare, a lawyer who was active in his own Democratic club. However, by the time the council met in the third week of August, no candidates could be found for Ridgeway, the most affluent city in the county, or the ghetto area encompassing the western part of Metroland and the small industrial enclave,

Iron City.

During the rest of August and the first week of September, the two most active members of the coordinating committee, both moderates, searched in vain for candidates. (In the meantime, without consulting the council, labor people were preparing for their own endorsements through COPE.) At the early September meeting of the 45th CDC the president exhorted members to find candidates for Ridgeway and western Metroland-Iron City before the endorsing convention the next week.

By the late September endorsing convention, candidates had been found. Riordan laughingly said to the delegates that one of the candidates "had to be dragged, kicking and screaming" into the race. He said the candidate from Ridgeway was a newspaper reporter and the candidate from western Metroland--Iron City was a lawyer who had been selected by the area's club. Neither candidate attended the convention.

Attendance at the convention was sparse. Although membership in the convention was open to all club members and members of various ethnic and labor groups, few people attended. No seats were contested. Although quorums existed for the subdistricts in the area of the 47th CDC, only one subdistrict of the 45th CDC had a quorum of 12. The candidate in this district, the president of a large club, was nominated by the delegates in his subdistrict and the entire convention ratified the choice, as it did the choices of the people in the two 47th CDC subdistricts. The candidates in the four subdistricts without quorums were nominated and selected unanimously by the entire convention. Ratification of the selection occurred the following week.

The two belatedly recruited candidates were among those whose selection had to be ratified later. The candidate from Ridgeway symbolized in a sense

the 45th CDC's desperation to find a candidate. At the request of the convention chairman, a delegate from Ridgeway announced that he wanted to nominate "a close friend and active Democratic worker from my club, Ray Walter."

"No, no!" cried the chairman. "Rod Waters, Rod Waters, not Ray Walter!"

"Oh, yes," replied the nominator with a smile, "my good friend Rod Waters!"

Laughter.

A woman rose: "I second the nomination. I know Rod Waters. I remember him at the College of Puget Sound fourteen years ago. He was a good student."

The chairman of the coordinating committee, Riordan, quickly asked to be recognized by the convention chairman. "Rod Waters," he said, "is a reporter for the Metroland Tribune." Some gasps escaped the audience. He quickly continued: "But he is a good Democrat and a real liberal."

Unanimous selection followed.

The Campaign

Twenty-eight candidates vied for places on the board. No candidate opposed creation of the new district. Candidates supported by the Metroland Tribune ran in all districts. The labor political arm, COPE, endorsed three CDC candidates, but also endorsed one labor union business agent who had not been endorsed by the CDC and refrained from endorsing candidates for three seats. The CDC candidates received much support from the official Democratic Party in the county. Ideological argument, in either political or educational

form, did not emerge in the campaign. In their mailers and other campaign material, the 45th and 47th CDC's gave support to programs supported by most of the other candidates. To Republican voters, the 45th CDC sent material noting the issues and containing long lists of "civic leaders" who supported the endorsed candidates. No mention was made of party affiliation, although the civic leaders were Democrats. To Democratic voters, the material stressed Democratic affiliation and exhibited pictures of several national and state Democratic leaders.

The Tribune, in both editorials and news columns, attacked the involvement of the Democratic Party in a nonpartisan campaign. After a period of indecision caused by fear of stressing partisan activity to voters accustomed to nonpartisanship, the 45th CDC, joined by the Democratic County Central Committee, counterattacked the Tribune, accusing it of masking its own partisanship in its endorsements. Throughout the campaign, more attention was given to this battle than to candidates' views on the junior college itself.

Only 16 percent of registered voters participated in the election, a figure less than normal for school board elections in the three previous years. The voters overwhelmingly supported establishment of the new district. The election resulted, however, in the defeat of all candidates endorsed by the 45th CDC, although the two candidates endorsed by the adjacent 47th CDC won. In the 45th CDC subdistricts, four candidates endorsed by the Tribune and one independent candidate, a retired junior college dean, won. Despite the loss of the candidates endorsed by the 45th CDC, Democrats did better than unaffiliated or unendorsed liberals had done in the past. The 45th and 47th CDC candidates drew 97,000 votes, the Tribune candidates, 99,000. Curiously, all candidates in the race with backgrounds in education won, re-

gardless of source of support.

Conclusion

The ideological nature of political volunteer groups and of the CDC in particular would have suggested a strong ideological component in the 45th CDC's approach to the campaign. In fact, political ideology was an important element. For some of the CDC initiators, entry meant an opportunity to enhance the overall power of the organization so that it could promulgate its basically liberal political beliefs. Moreover, the issue of race contributed to the development of interest among delegates. Dysfunctional in terms of black-white compatibility within the organization itself, the racial issue nevertheless did serve to provide an ideological base for white liberals whose interest in the junior college election otherwise was minimal.

Yet political ideology was not the only motivation for involvement. Monetary gain or opportunities for patronage exercised no attraction in getting leaders involved in the campaign. But many benefits could accrue to leaders personally from an increase in the organization's visibility and power. Power itself is a major factor in individuals' participation in political activities, and the distinction between motives for private gain and public interests is difficult to make (See Lutz, 1977, pp. 48-49). Many leaders in the 45th CDC aspired to--and eventually attained--governmental positions of some importance.

Even among those leaders who were motivated by their general political ideology, the connection between that ideology and educational issues was tenuous. Only one of the leaders, Van Dyke, and hardly any of the delegates

had significant knowledge of the purposes or functions of a junior college. The basic educational issues were developed after the decision was made to enter the campaign, and they were largely borrowed from other candidates. Except for the issue of technical education for blacks, which was basically generalized political ideology transferred to the educational milieu, no educational issue elicited much interest. The lack of interest contributed to the difficulty in getting candidates; even in those subdistricts where candidates were available, no competition for endorsement existed. Ultimately, the selection of candidates was based more on the need to keep the organization politically viable than on the need to ensure a unified ideological front. More important, no real choice in educational plans was presented to the voters. Certainly, partisanship did not serve to bring together public views on educational policy.

The involvement of the 45th CDC in the junior college board campaign provides no ammunition for those who see partisan involvement as causing a return to patronage and corruption. It does, however, indicate that at least in certain cases, involvement may be based on issues extraneous to education. Democrats were exhorted to vote for Democrats because of party ties, with little emphasis on local goals. Issues were muted. (Republican politics, of course, was simply hidden in the campaign). However laudatory general political ties may be, they can serve to hide or gloss over important educational problems as easily as does the hidden politics of nonpartisanship. Thus in many situations partisanship may differ little from nonpartisanship in terms of issue differentiation or aggregation.

NOTES

1. As used in this paper, ideology refers to a systematic set of assumptions, theories and values that offer an interpretation of, and program for, society as a whole and individuals in all aspects of their life. Political ideology refers to political life specifically. An ideological organization is one that espouses a systematic critique and program; its goals are derived from fundamental assertions about the nature of people and society and are interrelated. See Wilson (1973:46).

2. The induction of board members by other board members is a common form of recruitment in public bodies. See Cistone (1974:439-440).

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